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Lazell, Frederick John

Some autumn days in Iowa

SOME AUTUMN DAYS IN IOWA



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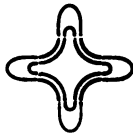
SOME AUTUMN DAYS IN IOWA



"SOME PERFECT DAY IN INDIAN SUMMER"

Some Autumn Days in Iowa

BY
Frederick John Lazell



CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA
THE TORCH PRESS
NINETEEN HUNDRED ELEVEN

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FOREWORD

This little volume completes the series of four booklets, the first one of which was published five years ago, in which the author so delightfully takes us on walks with him in God's out-of-doors, and asks us to look around on Nature with a seeing eye. There are those who will regret that the year has only twelve months, for next year's holiday time will not be the same with no month for Mr. Lazell's gifted pen to describe.

The author is in many respects the Gilbert White of this neighborhood. With a poetical spirit of intimacy he shows what is to be seen in a small Iowa district within five or six miles of his home. Like beloved Thoreau and good old John Burroughs he writes with a heart warm with the humanity that feels itself close to all living things.

In this volume, as in those that have preceded, the author invites us to tramp with him over the hills and through the forests, and the invitation

is too attractive to be declined. He shows us glimpses of nature that

*“Make the wild blood start
In its mystic springs”*

The task of the publisher of these charming sketches has indeed been a pleasant one. Unlike the monk of old who after years of painstaking and patient toil was glad to write in red ink at the end of the manuscript “Finis laus deo,” he cannot refrain from expressing his regret that the task is ended. With Oliver Twist he wishes for more.

WHEN OCTOBER COMES

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they say goodbye. In the early morning we are awakened as in the dear days of spring by the chirping of the robins and across the meadows come the faint carols of the meadow larks, occasionally almost as clear and musical as in the vernal season. We hasten forth to greet them and behold flocks of them again in the meadows. And as we are looking at them and listening to the attempts of the youngsters to imitate the notes of their parents there come the notes which are the dearest of all to us, the inimitable "mi fa," "mi fa," which we could recognize among a million birdvoices as the gentle call of the bluebird. From the tops of a tall elm across the field they float over to us, plaintively sweet as minor cadences in Mendelssohn, and in a moment the birds themselves pass over us and settle, five of them, upon a telephone wire near by. The flash of a bluebird's wing in the morning sunlight! Where is the man whose soul is not stirred by the sight? It is as true now as it was in the days of early spring that

*"God's in His heaven
All's right with the world."*

The cheery little ruby crowned kinglets are with us again, tarrying for a time as they pass from their breeding places in the north to their winter homes in the south. Many of them have been seen during the past week, chirping quietly but musically in the hazel-brush and the hawthornes and occasionally breaking into a little fragment of their May morning warble. They are among the smallest of the feathered folk, and their fall notes, while entrancingly sweet at this season of the year, are after all but a feeble reminiscence of the exquisite vocalization which we usually hear in their spring visits. Sometimes one of them goes so far as to sing the first half of the springtime strain.

Just a handful of trim little bits of feathered animation and beauty — many might pass by and fail to notice them at all. But he who takes a morning walk and tarries awhile to visit with a flock of these friendly little fellows flitting among the red leaves of a hawthorne will get himself so attuned with the great chords of the universe that he is not likely to be jarred into discord by any irksome duties which may devolve upon him during the day.

Bird life becomes abundant in these migratory days when the leaves are reddening in the autumn sun or flying in golden shoals before the south-west wind. Great flocks of redwings, grackles, and cowbirds are found in the cornfields. They rise like thunder clouds, thousands of them in one flock. The bluebirds also come in flocks, and with them are sparrows of many species and many varied notes.

But even if there were no birds at all, the gorgeous colorings of the woodlands would be a sufficient allurements for us. In October the glory of color comes in such overwhelming waves that it will not be unnoticed. Little color-fires light up the dark places in the woods; they burn and glow until whole hillsides are set aflame. Up the trunks and big branches of huge old oaks whose leaves may yet be glossy green, the Virginia creeper bursts into flame, as if the heart of the old tree glowed with a spiritual fire. Maples on the hillsides face the descending sun, and in their shelving foliage of red and gold all the distilled splendor of a thousand perfect sunsets has been gathered to fill man's heart so full of gladness



that he cannot help but worship the Author of it all. Look where some great vase-shaped elm stands alone on the river bottom, or near the brink of the creek, all its leaves turned to a bright yellow, as if Hebe had filled a huge goblet with golden wine and set it there as a loving cup for the annual feast of the gods. Ceaselessly, the bright leaves fall — as if the brimming goblet were spilling sparkling drops to the emerald cloth beneath. Not every elm has such a pure coloring, but now and then one may be found clad in almost a pure yellow.

October is the month of gorgeous colors. The wonder of it all never dies. The splendor never cloys — it is so varied and yet so evanescent. Each day has glories that were not observed yesterday and cannot be seen tomorrow. Each year we take note of the wondrous alchemy which manifests itself in a charming show of tints, the same series on the same trees, though not the same degrees of intensity each year. And the weather here in Iowa is always — it is safe to say always — so perfectly in keeping with the spectacle. The air is so keen and fresh, the sky so brightly blue, and

the wild strange waves of color are so rich and so glorious — dull indeed are the senses which do not feel it, cold is the heart which is not thrilled by it. Every hill is clad with glory, from every dale beauty calls her worshipers to many a wondrous shrine. There is a peculiar luminosity in the foliage which takes away all somberness and sadness from the season. The tinted leaves reflect the light and make the earth a paradise of sweetly blended colors. Over the valleys and the crests of the far ridges hangs the mystic haze of autumn, and over all is the dome of cloudless blue. What wonder if some hearts find more of God in scenes like this than in any temples made with human hands! What wonder if they sometimes neglect to listen to human voices telling of God while in the great out-of-doors God Himself is speaking!

It is very generally supposed that most of the splendor of our northern woods in October is caused by the frost. Indeed one botanist of some reputation printed the statement in his journal not so very long ago that “the frost is the magic dye-stuff which gives the trees their beauty.” But is that quite true? The best of botanists



WHEN OCTOBER DAYS WERE FINE

nowadays declare that it is not true at all. They say that frost has nothing to do with the coloring, except as it stops the leaves from growing; the coloring would come quite as surely, if not so early, if there were no frosts at all. And certainly the experience of the year seems to support their theory. There has been no frost yet, not enough to injure the most delicate vines in the gardens. Yet the splendor of the autumn woods has not been so marked for years. Take a walk — through any of the woods nearby — and note the exquisite glory of the Virginia creeper encircling the tall oaks, glowing like flaming pillars on the crests of the ridges where certainly there has been no frost at all. The sumacs began to show scarlet leaves as early as the first week in August — and continued to grow more vividly beautiful until the last of September.

The best and richest autumn colorings are found in the years when the weather is cool and moist but with no frost. Unfortunately such years come only a few times in one's lifetime. If the summer has been rainy and the autumn is cool, with frostless nights, the deep dyes have a

wondrous charm, and they persist on the twigs for many weeks, lengthening and glorifying the season of autumnal beauty. The next best tints are seen in the autumns when the weather has been rather warm but without frost. The tints are not so deep, neither do they remain so long, but they are nevertheless beautiful. The poorest season of all is that when killing frost comes in September; the leaves then turn brown and fall quickly with very little coloring. Sometimes a very hot day in October does much to bleach out the tints of the leaves, causing them to lose much of their beauty.

Late in the summer, when the buds for next year have been formed and filled in the axils of the leaves, and the work of the year is done, the tree begins to prepare for the winter. All summer long the leaves have been filled with a green substance which the scientists call chlorophyl — a word which comes from two Greek words meaning light green and leaf. The office of chlorophyl is to manufacture plant food from the sunshine and the soil water, converting them into starches and sugars for the growth of the tree. The leaves

are the chemical laboratories where the food for the tree is manufactured. In nature's wise and wondrous economy nothing is wasted. When the tree begins to prepare for the winter these sugars and albuminoids are withdrawn through the leaf stalks into the tree so that they shall not be lost. While these albuminoid matters are passing from the leaves to the twigs it is necessary that they be protected from the strong light, and some scientists are of the opinion that the coloring in the leaves serves this purpose. But there seems a clearer and better reason than this for the coloring itself.

All leaves contain a yellow matter called xanthophyl and when the green chlorophyl breaks up this yellow xanthophyl is exposed. In some trees this is the only change. The leaves turn from green to yellow, sometimes turn rusty brown and fall.

But in other cases the breaking up of the chlorophyl starts chemical changes in a coloring substance in the leaf called anthocyanin. When such ferments are only slightly acid the coloring of the leaves is almost a blue, as in the beginning of the

coloring of the ash. As the acids are developed, reds of varying brilliancy are produced, depending, it would seem, very largely upon the amount of acidity. The scientists are frank to say that the problem has not yet been completely worked out; but these are its main results. It may be easily understood that the mixtures of the various substances in chemical changes may result in an unlimited number of shades and tints of red, violet, purple, orange, salmon, and yellow, as we see them on the October hillsides. And thus both observation and science seem to prove that the frost has very little to do with the autumn coloring, except as it stops the growth of the leaf and starts these processes of decay. They would not come so soon if there were no frost, but they would certainly come.

There is almost limitless material for study in these autumn colorations. The careful observer will soon note that all the changes are from dark to brighter tints, like the tints of a sunrise, not like those of a sunset. There may be here and there an exception but this is the general rule. For example: The poison ivy begins with a rose

red and lightens to a coppery red and a golden yellow. Its color depends somewhat upon its location; it would seem the moister the place the deeper the color. Along the old river road southwest of the city there is a gorgeous display of it; almost every leaf a rich red. In Bever Park, just at the left of the Grande avenue entrance, a small tree is encircled with it; in this drier place almost every leaf is a golden yellow. The ash trees have been more beautiful this fall than they have been for many years. The exquisite gradations of coloring have been unmarred by frost. The coloring of this tree is one of the most interesting. It begins with the faintest tinge of purple upon the topmost leaves, as if a gossamer veil of purple had been spread over the upper part of the tree. In a day or two the purple tone on the topmost leaves is more decided and is reaching down to touch the leaves on the lower twigs. Then the leaves begin to show chocolate tones, then a coppery yellow, then a salmon yellow, and sometimes almost a pure yellow just as the leaves are about to fall. As the afternoon sun lights up these gradations of color, there is often just a suggestion of a lilac

tinge, giving a peculiar beauty to the tree. Panicked dogwood shows subtle shades of green and purple; it is one of the most interesting of the shrubs in October. The older wild cherry trees ripen their leaves into a beautiful wine color, and often they begin to lighten the hillsides in September while most of the other trees are green. Among the most beautiful of all the autumn leaves are those on the young shoots of the wild cherry and the choke cherry. They grade from an exquisite rose red to a yellow. The sycamore tree on the banks of the creek — there is one at Indian creek across from the golf grounds — shows fine contrasts of green and sepia; one leaf may be a perfect green while the next is a beautiful sepia with yellow lines showing where the veins run. Even the common blackberry adds its crimson and chestnut hues to the glory of the hedge rows. Often the hawthorne shows leaves almost as brilliantly scarlet as its fruit. The wahoo, or burning bush, begins with crimson, lightens to a rose red and a rose pink. It is one of the most beautiful of the shrubs in the autumn. The glory of the leaves is accented by the rose pink pods which burst open and display scarlet arils within.

The sweet viburnum, or black haw, dyes its leaves with a rich reddish brown, like the color of the carvings in some of the old cathedrals. Now and then a box elder is strikingly beautiful, a part of the leaves being green and others a very pale lemon yellow, making a charming contrast.

Iowa has been denied the great glory of the scarlet oaks which are so striking in some of the eastern states. But we have the white oaks, which show beautiful shades of purple mixed with fiery red and wine color. And the beauty of the white oaks is their ability to hold this wine color in their leaves and the persistence of the foliage which makes a hillside glow with color often through the month of November. Long after the other deciduous trees have become leafless, the white oaks, especially if they are young trees, hold nearly all their leaves, a waning wine color tinting the russet and brown for weeks and weeks, as if the trees were loath to lose the beauty of the season that has passed. The red oaks display varying shades of red and orange and drab, but the black oaks rarely show any colors excepting dingy yel-

low and rusty brown. The burr oak, or mossy cup oak, rarely has any great beauty of coloring. But the oaks, taken as a whole, are the glory of the Iowa hillsides in October, with a myriad of tints sweetly blended, glossy green, crimson and scarlet, yellow and russet, and the rich autumn brown that comes when the oxidation processes in the leaves have been completed and there remains in the leaf structure only the waste products of the chemical fires.

The coloring of a leaf usually begins at the midvein and gradually spreads through the network of veins to the outside of the leaf. In the ash leaves, for example, the purple first appears in the midrib, and then spreads to the surface of the leaf. In the cottonwoods, especially the young leaves, the midrib is a fine tint of red, but the flaky leaf itself turns yellow. As early as the last of August one may find crimson veins in the leaves of the Virginia creeper. Sometimes the leaves themselves when studied individually are somewhat of a disappointment. The colors are not nearly so pure as they appeared when seen on the tree. This is especially true of the oaks. The



"THE OAKS ARE THE GLORY OF OCTOBER"

sunlight adds much, blending the impure colors so beautifully that they seem like pure tints. It also seems to aid in the chemical process which takes place in the leaves. The interior of the foliage mass is yellow while the leaves on the outside twigs, which catch the full sunlight, show tints of orange and scarlet and crimson. To the artist the sunlight makes every tree at this season of the year a rare study of high lights and half-tones and shadows.

The observer will note, also, that there is much of individuality in the autumnal coloring of the trees. Each tree shows the same tints year after year. For instance, one of the maples puts out a branch over the avenue glowing like a red torch, so vivid that it is conspicuous for several blocks. Another tree never shows any red tints but always the most beautiful golden color like the finest of butter. Another not far away always shows an exquisite mingling of green and gold. A similar blending of green and gold is seen in a magnificent willow in an open field. One may have a host of these field and forest friends and he notes that they possess individualities just like

his friends in the human, animal and bird families.

While all the wealth of autumnal beauty has been delighting the eye, the leaf has been preparing to fall. At the base of the leaf-stalk, where it is joined to the twig, a layer of cells has been forming, separating it from the twig. A small crack between the leaf-stalk and the twig widens and deepens. Finally the leaf has so delicate a hold that a few drops of rain or a little puff of wind detaches it, and it falls. Early some morning a maple tree stands, clothed with yellow leaves, whitened by the frost, when the sun comes up; as the frost melts the leaves fall by hundreds and the emerald grass beneath the old tree is covered with them, as with a carpet of gold. A little breeze comes up and other leaves are blown from the trees in drifts. They sail before the wind like the flocks of the white-throated sparrows going southward, little short flights from bush to bush. The wind sports with them, leaves them in drifts on the hillsides and in the valleys, covering the roots of the hepaticas and bloodroots and the violets which are to bloom in the early spring time.



"THE MUSHROOMS MAKE A GREAT DISPLAY"

The life of the leaves is a life of service. They make food for the tree and add to the wealth of the world; they feed the insects and shelter the birds; they give shade and comfort to mankind, delight his eyes and exalt his heart with their beauty of form and color. When at last they die, almost their last service is to protect the roots of the plants of spring. Finally the brown and wasted wrecks of their former beauty are resolved into their elements and dissolved in the soil water to make food for other leaves in the years which are to come.

Great rains come and then the mushrooms have a great display. In graceful fronds the sulphur-colored polyporus pushes out from the side of the stump. It is a beautiful yellow and you may see it for an eighth of a mile through the open woods. The parasol mushroom lifts itself like a golf ball at the end of a lengthening stick and you watch it for two or three days to see just how tall it will grow. Then it begins to open, slowly at first, but after a while it is fully spread like this and you can see for yourselves why it has been called the parasol mushroom. It is good

to eat if one cares to pull it, but really there is more pleasure in just looking at it. Some things in this world were made to gratify finer senses than taste.

A little later the phosphorus mushroom lights up the dark woods at night with a weird and ghostly glow. It is a very interesting plant whether you admire its dark orange yellow in the day time or its phosphorescent glow at night.

In the barnyard the next morning you may chance to find the shaggy mane, or the great coprinus, and usually it is growing in great colonies which some folk unwisely destroy, not knowing how good these mushrooms are when they are properly cooked.

Grasses grow tawny and the lily pads are baked dark and crisp as the sun's rays slant more and more each day. The "season of mists and yellow fruitfulness" begins and the sportsman thinks of laying down his rod and taking up his gun. Jacksnipe are seen more often and their young hide themselves artfully among the long grasses which fringe the lake.

Red haws ripen along the river banks and the black haws in the pastures grow plumper and



"THE LONG GRASSES WHICH FRINGE THE LAKE"

softer. From the face of the cliffs above the creek the wild spikenard hangs its clusters of aromatic fruit.

The burning bush begins to light up the dark places in the woods with its myriads of scarlet berries bursting from their magenta husks and upon every roadside fence the bittersweet displays its fruits.

Cornfields show great shocks pitched like an army of tents and sometimes the farmer opens one of them and husks out the great wealth of golden grain. Everywhere nature is asking man the ceaseless question: What sort of fruit have you been ripening during the summer years of your life?

We take our last looks, too, at the fall flora of the prairies. If an appreciative man had an acre of native prairie, partly "slough" and partly upland, with a fence around it and narrow walks threading through it, how astonished he would be at the succession of handsome native flowers submerging its varied grasses beneath changeful waves of color. I know several such acres which would easily be worth a thousand dollars to the

man who had both the money and the appreciation. Especially would such a man feel well repaid in the autumn when the advancing army of composites marches over the land, tall and soldierly and splendid, holding almost undisputed sway for many weeks but vanquished at last by the union blue of the gentians, which are so beautiful during September and early October. One stem of a closed gentian found the second week in October bore forty-two perfect blossoms, arranged in one terminal and five axillary clusters, much after the manner of the Japanese five-pointed floral arrangements. Another specimen had a stem almost four feet tall, twice as tall as normal. One specimen of fringed gentian bore sixty-two blossoms.

The downy gentian is not so tall nor are the blossoms so numerous; usually not more than a dozen are found on a single stalk. But their pleated buds and the large blue blossoms with pointed lobes and deeply cut appendages between them are so fine that sometimes one is tempted to say they are the prettiest gentians of all.

With the gentians there are plenty of blue lobelias, now and then a stalk of Indian tobacco



"THE BEAUTY OF THE GENTIAN"

with its little blue blossoms, a few late golden rods and asters, *Helenium*, everlasting, now and then a bunch of blue violets, occasionally a stalk of *campanula* bearing a few faded bell flowers, now and then the spike of the rose-red *polygonum*, and often the yellow *potentilla*. Sometimes also we find the white flowers of the boneset or a cluster of pink and lavender blossoms on a late stalk of *bergamot*. Even the blossoming weeds, like the shepherd's purse and the hedge mustard, seem welcome now. And always there is the late dandelion which Nature uses for a period when she writes the floral finis of the year. These late flowers are as dear as Tennyson's "remembered kisses after death."

October mornings bring memories of the springtime but the evenings have sober, if not somber, suggestions of the long cold nights ahead. One such afternoon in late October will never be forgotten. It began with a carol and ended with a dirge. The big old honey-locusts down by the creek had shed all their leaves, but their lower branches were occupied by mourning doves and juncos and a great colony of gold-finches made

music in the topmost twigs. Not with their full song as in the nesting time of July and August, but a happy, canary-like little twitter, sweet as little silver bells. Did you ever hear an organist play Costa's "March of the Israelites," first fortissimo with the full organ, and then repeat the strain pianissimo, with the sweet organ? Well, the goldfinches would make you think of the latter. Their nesting joys and cares were done. The old birds had led forth their little families, taught them the art of the simple life, getting all things needed for their sustenance and joy direct from Mother Earth, as Thoreau did at Walden. Then the families had all gathered in a great flock which was here assembled in the splendid sunshine. Autumn had waved its magic wand above them and their brilliant costumes of jet and gold, which had shone so resplendently in summer's regal courts, were slowly changing to the homespun overalls and jumpers of brown, fitting costumes for the merry company of tramps who are to ramble up and down the sunny valleys through the winter months, feasting on the fat of the land wherever they may find it. But their joy of life

was undiminished, and as they floated from the honey locusts to the big patches of wild hemp beneath they chased each other up and down the imaginary billows of the air with as much abandon and joy as if they were filled with frolic at the thought of the long vacation between now and the next nesting time.

The hawthorne bushes by the cornfield fence were inhabited by the tree sparrows which had just arrived from the north to spend the long winter visit with us and the chestnut crowns of their heads with their pretty bills, the upper black and the lower yellow, together with their tinkling notes, will be pleasant sights and sounds for us every sunny day from now until the spring birds come. A covey of prairie chickens passed from the cornfield across the dusty lane into the fringe of hazel thicket on the other side and we crept quite near enough to shoot some of them — with the fieldglass — as they rose with a whirr and passed over the crest of the hill. A song-sparrow gave a feeble “Oleet-oleet-oleet,” followed by his little trill. From afar there floated across the field the soft notes of the bluebird, but the flocks

of a fortnight ago are seen no more and these faint notes came like the last goodbye of a friend on the stern of a departing ship, bound for a foreign shore.

The argillaceous limestone bank which sloped down to the creek was brilliant with the bluish-purple of the five-flowered gentian, positively the last flower of the year to blossom in such profusion. Apparently indifferent to the nightly frosts, this pretty little plant puts out its branches like the branches of a candelabra at the shrine of some saint and then lights the clusters of blue candles at the end of each branch, scores of them on a single plant. Not until the ice begins to form in the quiet bayous will these blue flames be quite extinguished.

Late touches of autumnal beauty were given by the burning bush which grows to a height of ten or twelve feet here and there along the creek, with its pink pods opened wide to display the scarlet arils within and the wine-red leaves completing a picture of entrancing beauty. The bittersweet twined over the low trees and shrubs, its golden pods and scarlet arils giving a similar effect, and

now and then a vase-like elm was seen which had held all its leaves until they had ripened into a rich gold, like a huge vase overflowing with golden wine for this farewell festival of the fall.

The willows and weeds along the creek bottom were alive with those beautiful sparrows of the fall-time, the white-throats and the fox sparrows. The latter is marked as handsomely as a thrush, and he is one of the finest singers of the sparrow family. And the white-throat! What nature-lover has not rejoiced to see him feeding among the weeds and hazel-brush in the spring and the fall. Get a mental picture of him as he scratches among the grass and raises his pretty head now and then to pull down one of the grass-stems above him, meanwhile displaying that patch of pure white at his throat. There is a picture which will stay in your mind forever; it is worth more than all the pictures in the bird books, not one of which shows the white-throat as he really is. And sometimes when you are passing through the October woods, after the sun has set and the thicket is filled with the soft clucks of migrating robins, and a pair of chewinks now and then hop

in front of you down the woodland road, you will hear a feeble little warble from over in the brush. It is the sublimated song of the white-throat, softly warbling in his dreams!

And the juncos! No mention of the late October woods and fields would be complete without a word for this cheery little winter visitor who comes to us in October with great flocks of his kindred and fills the thickets with his crisp "zip, zip," varied with an occasional "sol-te-sol" or five or six quickly-uttered little whistles. They are thickest in October, on their way from the north down to southern Tennessee, and again in April, on their way back to the northland. During these migrations the Iowa woods and thickets are filled with them, and if you pass quietly along the cowpath through the hazel after sundown you will see them sitting with their little heads drooped in sleep, as if thoroughly tired out with their day's activities. Their prettiest poses are seen in the sunny mornings when they sit on a low hazel-twigg and stretch their little necks to feast on the seeds in the faded aster-heads above them.

The setting sun was sending long rays across the valley to the timber on the high ridge east of

the creek, investing the crimson and maroon of the oaks with a peculiar glory, and we crossed the bridge, tarrying awhile to watch the muskrats swim close to the bottom of the creek, pushing out with their hind paws vigorously and making rapid progress down the stream. Then we climbed to a high point of the bluff and watched the sun sink, serene and splendid, into a soft sea of gold and amber, hanging at the last like a great round ball of flame while the western sky was filled with tender radiance. Then down the bluff and up the narrow path through the glen, where it is almost dark, although at the far end of the path, where the forest ends abruptly, the sky has still a tinge of flame-color as if it had borrowed some of the beauty from the oak leaves over head. Not a leaf stirs; not a sound is heard. But the frost is creeping silently up the glen like a great white, crouching ghost. There is still light enough to see its filmy form at our feet, and we feel the death-like grip of its spectral fingers. Suddenly there is a sound:

“Kate; — — — —; Kate; — — — —; Ka—
ty.”

That is all. He hasn't the strength or the courage to tell us that "Katy did." Maybe the creeping specter strangled him into silence before he could complete this last dirge for the dying year. It was more mournful than "The Dead March in Saul," more dramatic than the death of Baron Chevrial and the crash of his shattered glass as the wine stained the cloth of the fatal banquet table. October has poured the last of her ruby and golden wines. The rose has faded out of the sky; the gloom of the day and of the year is upon us. Gray days are coming. Yet we shall find beauty and strength in them.

OUT-OF-DOORS IN NOVEMBER

XI. — OUT-OF-DOORS IN NOVEMBER

WHEN the green has gone from the woods and fields, save for a few patches here and there which look like oases in the wide-spread desert of brown, and when only a few brown leaves cling to the branches of the white oaks and the black oaks shivering in the keen winds, few there are who either seek or find anything worth while in the great out-of-doors. And yet there are dozens of days in November when the sunshine plays on the russets and the sepias of the timbered slopes, makes warmth and brightness in the sheltered green valleys, makes even the bare brown fields inviting. In Iowa there are usually more bright than cloudy days well along up to Thanksgiving. There are sun-rises and sunsets with a quality of beauty not to be found at any other season of the year.

And when the leaves have first fallen and the trees and shrubs stand revealed in their winter outlines, there are new pictures, new forms, more

delicate colorings and an abundance of new promises for one who has the eyes to see. Stand upon any of the open knolls and look across the timbered valley or up the nearest slope where the sunshine is flooding the trees with a softly mellow radiance. Is it all brown and sere and dead? To be sure, the great color-flames of October have all died down; but they have not left a scene of ashes and desolation, lost hopes and irreparable ruin. Among the cool grays and the warm browns which vary from a violet brown to cinnamon there are myriads of little living flames strung along every twig, the promise of new life, new growth, new beauty. And they are beautiful in themselves, for their colorings are among the most delicate of the year. The soft grays of the maples warm into a rich reddish tinge towards the end of the twigs where the tender red buds are fully formed waiting for the warm days which are sure to come about the middle of next March when they will break into creamy blossom and smile down into the river, newly released from its icy chains. In the morning sunlight the old maples by the river and the young maple groves around

the homesteads glow with a cheerful ruddy hue. Day by day the clumps of red-osier dogwood which were a grayish green all summer, now take on more of life and color and by the time the snow-drifts are blown around them every stem will be blood red to form a striking contrast against the immaculate purity of the driven snow. The bitternut hickory trees have a color all their own; every twig is tipped with pointed yellow buds. the trademark of this species, the promise of the life that is to be and the delight of the observer in these sunny days of the later fall and the early winter. Away across the fields where the willow fences separate one man's farm from another, or line the country lanes, there is a warm flush of coppery red as the sunlight bathes the myriads of smooth stems and twigs. No, there are neither dead ashes nor dreary monotony. The picture takes on more color the longer you look at it, and gradually you come to realize that every twig above you, every seed and root beneath your feet, is ready to spring into eager and lavish life just as soon as the frosts have passed and the spring rains give the signal.

Over the fluttering robe of the hills a stain of sepia sinks, deeper and deeper each day. Soon every hill and vale is steeped in the strong color and the days of the Indian summer have come.

Very beautiful are these days by the old creek where the red birches grow out from the bank and help make the color scheme of brown. Even the waters of the creek have changed from green to brown. In keeping with this color is the brown coat of the little winter wren who comes down from the north and tarries awhile amid the brown leaves and hedgerows.

These fallen leaves claim our attention the most. For a while they danced and fluttered on the forest floor but they have lain very quiet and still since the hard frosts came. Rare studies in coffee-brown and chocolate-brown, tan and coffee, russet and golden-brown — all shades and tints are here. How worthless the leaves seem. And how soon forgotten. And how speedily do men and women, like the leaves of the forest, pass into oblivion. And yet their lives were worth while. How grand was the work they did! But for them the trees would have died, the woods and

the groves would have been no more. What music they made! And what grateful shade! How delicately beautiful they were in the days of their youth! What a comfort and help they were when they came to their maturity! How they tempered and purified the atmosphere! How they guarded the springs from the fierce heat of the sun, how they made food for the twigs and the branches and the trunks of the old trees, and how well they cared for the generation destined to follow them, the tiny buds cradled at the bases of their own stalks!

The lost leaves and the lost days, how they seem to woo us with their memories. The days and the leaves which come not back, how beautiful they were, how full of light and loveliness. But see, already the twigs on the bare branches are studded with the buds for the year which lies ahead. And they help us to hope for perfect beauty and faultless fruit in the days when our dreams come true.

The autumn of a year, or of a life, is for many a season of pensiveness and regrets. But it need not be so. It is better to think of the autumn,

not as Bryant did when he wrote his "Death to the Flowers," but as Shelley did when he wrote his "Ode to the West Wind":

*"Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is.
What if my leaves are falling like its own?
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
Will take from both a deep autumnal tone
And be
The trumpet of a prophecy. Oh wind,
If winter comes, can spring be far behind?"*

And the nature-lover knows that every winter shall surely change to spring, and has faith that death shall always end in life, for life is ever abundant and abiding, while death is only partial and transitory. Standing on the bank of the old creek in the sweet stillness of some perfect day in Indian summer, out of the memories of the summers that are gone and out of the lavender mist that veils the vista of the valley, there rises before us a vision of the fairer, sweeter summer that is yet to be. Seasons come and go, but we follow that vision. Sometimes, amid the work and the worry of the world, the vision may grow dim. But when we escape to the freedom of the out-of-doors and are touched by the ministry of Nature's beau-

ty, there are precious moments when the vision seems all aglow with light and color and filled with a great peace and comfort.

Though these buds hang thickly upon every twig, not only in the woods but also over every city sidewalk from the fall of the leaf until spring, many persons fail to notice them at all and it is common to hear expressions of surprise when attention is called to them. A more careful examination shows how full they are of beauty and promise for the coming year. They may contain leaves, or flowers, or both. In some of them is the whole inflorescence of next year, delicately beautiful, almost infinitely tiny, and yet perfect in all its parts. Wrapped in tough, sometimes in varnished bud scales, as the cottonwood and the aspens, these baby leaves and flowers spend the winter in security, perfectly formed, ready to emerge from their swaddling clothes and grow into grace and beauty when the warm suns come. Some will unfold into the delicate pink and gray green leaves of the oaks, some into the compound leaves of the ashes and the walnuts and the hickories, some into the handsome foliage of the ma-

ples. Others will develop into the pink crab-apple blossoms, and white hawthorne blossoms which make such masses of color at the borders of the woodlands in the beautiful days of May. Still others will grow into the long catkins of the cottonwoods which lengthen and thicken until they look like long red strawberries on the fine old trees. All these forms of beauty are snugly packed in miniature in these winter buds. Everywhere the story is the same — the evidence of the life which is and the promise of the greater and the better life which is to be. So it is with all the trees and the shrubs, large or small, the little ironwood tree with its trinity of catkins pointing upwards from almost every twig, to the giant black oak where the tiny acorns sit snug on the twigs ready for the warm days of spring when the robins again begin to build their nests.

In the bare woods and fields, moreover, we have an opportunity to admire and to study the forms of the trees. There is a grace and beauty in the shape of a vase-like elm, a ruggedness and strength in the corky, gnarled branches of a burr oak which is fully as interesting as the appear-



"STURDY WHITE OAKS STAND LIKE SENTINELS"

ance which the same trees present when they are clothed in their summer dress. The sturdy white oaks which lift their trunks fifty and sixty feet high without a branch, challenge admiration by their ability to wrestle with the most furious northwest winds of the winter. They stand like sentinels at the gateway of the forest, and in their immense dome-like tops may first be heard the bugles which announce the coming of the storm king. In the summer and the early fall they were thickly fruited with acorns, but you shall scarcely find one now, for the wild creatures of the woodland eagerly seized them as fast as they fell and stored them for the winter. There's a vast difference between the taste of the sweet white acorn of a white oak and the bitter yellow acorn of a black oak, and none knows it better than the squirrel or the chipmunk.

This storing of nuts and acorns, by-the-way, is done by some of the birds as well as by such animals as the squirrels and the white-footed mouse and the chipmunk. Down at Midriver Park there is a family of young red-headed woodpeckers. The majority of red-headed woodpeckers

left us more than a month ago and you shall rarely find one in the woods now. But if you go to Midriver Park you may find this family of five. Evidently they mean to spend the winter there; at least it is hoped so. The other day in a walk through the Iowa river bottoms from North Liberty up to Midriver Park, not a single red-head was seen or heard. But no sooner had I opened the park gate until one of this family of five red-heads was seen upon a tree near by and it was only a few minutes until the other four had been found.

For six weeks this family of young red-heads has been very busy storing acorns. Whether the acorns on some of the trees in the park are more to their taste than those which are found beyond is not known. Perhaps the handsome young fellows don't care to get very far away from the tree where they were hatched. They make the wild black cherry trees their principal storehouses, presumably because of the flaky bark behind which they push the acorns they have gathered. It is fun to watch one of them. He hunts around among the dead leaves on the forest floor

for an acorn and flies with it in his bill to the trunk of the cherry tree where he sticks by the help of his toes and his stiff pointed tail and then he proceeds to put the acorn away for the winter. Sometimes he forces it into a temporary crevice while he drills a hole just through the bark large enough to hold the acorn tightly. More often he turns his head sidewise and pushes the acorn behind a flake of the bark; in such cases the force is a steady push exerted by the muscles of the neck, instead of blows from the strong bill. Behind one flake of bark there were found seven acorns which the woodpecker had hid and it was estimated that there were not fewer than a hundred in the trunk of one of the trees. Sometimes one of the young red-heads stops for lunch which is usually eaten on the stump of a tree which has been cut or upon one of the park tables. You may find the remains of such meals on several of the stumps.

In Charles Reade's *Never Too Late to Mend* there is a story of two Englishmen in the Australian gold mines walking many miles one Sunday morning to hear the song of an English sky-

lark which a boarding-house keeper had in a cage. The lark gave them visions of May mornings in the green fields of far-away England where the hedgerows were abloom with the white of the hawthorne, and the meadows gay with buttercups and daisies. A red-headed woodpecker can't sing like an English skylark but he is every bit as interesting, and if this family of red-heads stays in Midriver Park all winter at least one pilgrim will travel thither often to see again in fancy the sunlit days of summer when the woodpeckers were wee babes in the woods, to see the anemones dancing on their stalks beneath the hazel, the shoals of waxy, white blossoms of the bloodroot on the steeply sloping river bank, the lobelias and the brook sunflowers along the water's edge, to see the glint of the flicker's golden wing and to hear again in fancy the rich mellow notes of the rose-breasted grosbeak.

Nearly everybody knows the red-headed woodpecker and the flicker, but not so many are familiar with the hairy woodpecker, the downy woodpecker, and the red-bellied woodpecker. The hairy and the downy are especially common, and

you may find them every time you go to the winter woods. Both are dressed in black and white, with a broad white stripe down their backs, and the males have scarlet patches on their heads. The red-bellied woodpecker has a beautifully checkered back of black and white and sometimes he is called the "Checkerback." He has a larger and a more vivid patch of scarlet, reaching from his forehead to the nape of his neck. Nine times out of ten you will find the woodpecker on the trunk or the larger branches of the forest trees, hanging on by his four toes, two turned forward and two others turned backward, and also sitting, as it were, upon his tail which is stiff and rounded and usually held at an angle of thirty to forty degrees from the tree-trunk. He flies past you with a sharp cry, strikes the trunk of a tree like a bullet, and usually goes around to the other side of it until he discovers that your intentions are peaceful, when he will come around on your side of the tree and give you an opportunity to study him as he works. He scans every crack, crevice, seam, and knot, and his reward are the eggs of moths and beetles. This is easy work and the cocoons some-

times furnish him a fine feast as he tears them open and gulps the toothsome contents. But sometimes he stops and hammers the trunk or the branch with his chisel-like bill. He has heard the slight movement of a borer in the tree and he quickly drills a hole large enough and deep enough to run in his long barbed tongue and "spear" the borer. In a decaying basswood tree he does as much execution with his chisel-like bill as if it were a real carpenter's chisel. In this case he had chiseled big holes from one side of the tree to the other and the chips down below probably would have filled a bushel basket. But this tree was dying, anyway. With the exception of the holes where he makes his nest, the woodpecker's drillings are solely for the purpose of getting at the borers and the cocoons which infest the tree. But for this beneficial work of the woodpeckers and their allies we soon should have no trees. The insects would destroy all the foliage in a single season.

There are many of these allies. There is the brown creeper which is very abundant in the woods just now. You may see them in every walk

through the woods, little fellows, with coats of brown and vests of white and with rounded tails just like a woodpecker, traveling usually in spiral fashion and contenting themselves with the food which may be had without drilling. For the most part they are silent and their ceaseless climbing and hunting from dawn till dark may seem monotonous. But on some bright mornings they give frequent cheerful chirps, especially when flying from one branch to another, as if to tell you that they are fully contented with the place in the scale of creation to which they have been assigned. Then there is the nut-hatch with a coat of bluish gray and cheeks of white. He, too, sticks close to the tree trunks, but you may easily tell him by his color and by the further fact that he runs down the tree as often as he runs up. When a woodpecker goes down the tree he goes backwards. but the nut-hatch is equally at ease running down headfirst.

You will also find the black-capped chickadees, traveling in little flocks sometimes down among the weeds, more often in the trees, especially among the ragged old red birches by the river

banks where they rustle happily among the pappy bark and find insect food. They are sure to tell you their names almost as soon as they see you — “Chick-a-dee-dee-dee,” and sometimes, in the bright mornings, a clear, musical “La sol,” perhaps the most perfect musical interval in bird-song. At least it is one of the easiest to recognize.

During the first two weeks of November, also, there are many little flocks of the golden-crowned kinglets, tiny little fellows with coats of olive-green and with beautifully marked heads, especially the males; there is a tiny patch of flame color in the center of the crest bordered with lemon-yellow which in turn is framed in black. You may hear their faint chirpings before you see the birds, and after some training you will learn to recognize them instantly. The tiny sprites will be found often on the slender twigs of the willows by the river or the creek where they find the kind of insect food which they most prefer. But sometimes you will find a bevy of them among the hawthornes or the hazel on the uplands, and they will flit from bush to bush just far enough in front of

you to keep out of harm's way, but near enough for you to admire their exquisite beauty.

And these are only a few of the birds to be found in the November woods and fields. Often there are flocks of red-winged blackbirds flying leisurely and laughingly towards the southland. They perch in some big old soft maples and water elms down by the brink of the river and give the famous "creaking" chorus which is so common in the springtime. They whistle and croak and call to each other and amidst all the medley and the din some of the young males are giving their "O-ka-lee" call, sweet and melodious as in the spring when white blossoms of the pussy willows, bejeweled with golden anthers, hung over the shining waters.

The red-tailed hawk makes painted circles as he soars just above the tree-tops giving his piercing scream from time to time, and sometimes a pair of them sit on the bare branch of a big cottonwood or float over the bare fields on the watch for their prey. The scream of the bold and jaunty blue-jay rings through the thickets and a crow's call is as full of courage and resoluteness

and strength as the gnarled limb of the oak tree upon which he sits.

There are still gold-finches and purple finches, also, and the long-drawn out "s-w-e-e-t" rises from the weed-patches where the gold-finches are feeding, or the "per-chic-o-ree" floats down to you as they fly across the river bottoms in the same graceful waves, now up, now down, as they did in the hot days of July and August while their babies were growing in the downy nests in the bushes and the thistles. Tree-sparrows and juncos feed in flocks among the seeded stalks and tinkle you a welcome. Occasionally you hear the call of a quail and sometimes start up a covey from some of the rougher "sloughs" where the blackened stalks of sumac and the brown, rustling weed-stalks and dry grasses are all that is left of the summer's glory.

In November the hornets' nests, which are often found hanging from the lower branches of the leafless trees, are beginning to go to pieces. They are made of paper, and the rains and winds of the fall and early winter soon loose them from the branches, where they hung safely all summer



"HORNETS' NESTS OFTEN FOUND HANGING"

and housed the colony of busy workers. One of them is shown in the lower right-hand corner of the picture by the stump where the woodchuck is. Many a boy has carried home one of these deserted hornets' nests to adorn his den — where his mother was not too fastidious. Perhaps he has cut it open to note the many tiers of cells, suspended one above another. Perhaps he has learned that every one of these nests has its beginning in a little cluster of three cells, so small as to be overlooked in the springtime. When the queen hornet is awakened from the sleepy state in which she has passed the winter by the warm sunshine of the springtime she crawls out of her crevice and spends some time satisfying her hunger and in choosing a suitable place for the colony which she is about to start. The whole burden of the work and the responsibility is upon her. When she has found a suitable place she flies to a fence rail or a dead limb and with her strong jaws bites out some of the wood. This she chews and mixes with saliva until it forms a papery paste. The hornets are the original pulp paper-makers. Long before mankind learned the art of making paper

from the forest trees the bald-faced hornet — *vespa maculata* — was constructing her nest out of her “handmade” paper. She makes enough paper to construct three little cells, suspended from the branch of a tree by a paper stalk. In the center cell, the only complete one as yet, she deposits one egg. Then she builds other cells around this little cluster and as fast as each cell gets its six sides she deposits in it an egg. Finally there is a whole layer or “cake” of these cells, similar to those of the honey-bee except that they are built of paper instead of wax. In each of them she has left an egg. In about five days the eggs hatch into larvæ and now the busy queen has to forage from morning till night to keep their voracious appetites satisfied. Jar the cells at this time and you will see the blackish heads of the larvæ pushing out of the cells in eager expectation, just as young birds will raise their heads and open their mouths when you approach the nest. In about nine days the larva becomes a pupa. It ceases eating, and from its mouth there issues silk which makes for it a silky cocoon. During the next thirteen days it stays in this cocoon and

gradually grows into the form of a hornet — not like its mother, the queen hornet — but a “worker,” a female without the power to lay eggs. When these workers hatch out they set to work to help feed the younger babies and help build more cells so that the mother, the queen hornet, may give her whole time to egg-laying. By and by she lays eggs which hatch into “drones,” which are the male hornets. Meanwhile the nest grows larger. The paper wall which surrounded the first small layers of cells is torn down, worked over and made into a new and a larger wall within which there are additional and larger layers of cells, the top of one suspended cell forming the floor for the next one above it. Towards the last of the summer the queen lays eggs in larger cells which develop into “queen” hornets. They are carefully fed and cared for by the “workers” and after a time they mate with “drones” and thus the life cycle is completed. When the frosts come the drones and the workers all die and the queens leave the nests and seek crevices and crannies, as their mother had done before them, in which to spend the winter. Then you may take the deserted nest

without fear of being pursued and stung. If you do not take it the rains and winds soon beat and soften it into wet pulp and it falls from the trees to the floor of the forest.

If one queen starts a colony which produces many other queens before the season is over, why are there not more hornets' nests and more hornets? Well, some of the queens die during the winter, some of them are eaten in the early spring, and often you may find a little cluster of cells which tell plainly that after the queen had started her nest she gave her life to furnish food to some creature larger and stronger than herself, and so the little colony which she had started never developed farther. Life is full of tragedies, and you may read the story of many of them in the bare woods and fields of November and December. It is Nature's way, and it is a wise way. If every bud developed into leaf and shoot the tree would soon be a hopeless labyrinth. If every seed grew and flourished the forest would be an impenetrable jungle of useless growth; if every bald-faced hornet or yellow jacket queen lived and produced a colony we should soon have a

greater plague than the Egyptians of Pharaoh's day. What was it Tennyson said of Nature:

*"So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life."*

There are usually enough individuals to preserve the type until the type itself develops through the countless years into something higher and nobler and its work in the process of evolution is accomplished.

But flowers, asks some doubting Thomas; were there flowers in November? Think of the severe frosts we had in October and the sharper frosts in early November! Ah, to be sure there were flowers. Not growing by every wayside, as in June, of course; but enough of them to make many a dainty little bouquet. After the third week in September, we cease to look for new flowers. It then becomes a pleasant task to determine which of our floral friends will stay the longest with us, amid the discouraging nightly frosts. It is equally pleasant, sometimes, to note how many human friends stay by us when the frosts of misfortune come.

No fewer than forty-three species of plants were found blossoming in November — and if there had been more leisure there would have been more of this list:

Common blue violet, hedge mustard, shepherd's purse, pepper-grass, pansy, common chickweed, common mallow, red clover, alsike, white clover, white sweet clover (*Melilotus alba*), common cinquefoil, rough cinquefoil, white golden-rod (*Solidago bicolor*), hard-leaved golden-rod (*Solidago rigida*), late golden-rod (*Solidago serotina*), Canada golden-rod (*Solidago Canadensis*), gray golden-rod (*Solidago nemoralis*), heath aster (*Aster ericoides*), tall white aster (*Aster paniculatus*), purple-stem aster (*Aster puniceus*), arrow-leaved aster (*Aster sagittifolius*), common blue wood aster (*Aster cordifolius*), horseweed, everlasting, mayweed, yarrow, tansy, dandelion, sow thistle, Indian tobacco, bellflower, fringed gentian, five-flowered gentian, English charlock, sneezeweed (*Helenium autumnale*), blue lobelia, spiderwort, yellow woodsorrel, rosin weed (*Silphium perfoliatum*), common mullein, self-heal.

To be sure, some of the flowers were represented by only one, two, or three blossoms, as in the case of the bellflower and the two lobelias. Some readers might put a question mark after pepper-grass and shepherd's purse, objecting that they are weeds, not flowers, but surely their little white blossoms may be called flowers in November, especially on sunny mornings, when the melting hoarfrost bathes them in a spring-like dew.

The species of golden-rod which made the bravest show was the gray or field golden-rod, sometimes called Dyer's weed, or dusty golden-rod, easily recognized because its slender stems and ashy-gray leaves have a dusty look.

It was a chilly morning, the tenth, with a cold wind blowing from the northwest, and the ice, which had been broken in the farmers' watering-troughs along the road was fully half an inch thick. But there was a sheltered clay bank on one side of the road through the timber which was fairly yellow with the blossoms of this golden-rod and the brilliant yellow never looked quite so

beautiful. Henceforth the bank will be treasured as a November flower garden. Not

"I know a bank where the wild thyme blows"

But

I know a bank where the golden-rod blows

—In November.

The plant which makes the greatest show during the month is the *Aster ericoides*. It has a long string of common names, varying with localities, white heath aster, frost-weed aster, Michaelmas daisy, farewell summer, white rosemary, dog-fennel, mare's-tail, and scrub-bush. It grows from one to three feet high, its leaves are small and rigid and its numerous flower-heads are about half an inch across, the rays white or faintly tinged with rose. The plant is not common hereabouts, except in patches here and there along some of the railroads. On November fifth these patches made beautiful masses of white and gold in strange contrast with their sere and brown surroundings. They were flowering abundantly, hundreds of blossoms upon a single plant. "Hold," cries doubting Thomas again, "not hundreds?" Ah, yes, Thomas. Count them, begin-

ning at the lowest branch, and, one by one, up to the top. This branch has thirty-five blossoms. Count on. One hundred, two hundred, three hundred, and the final count is three hundred eighty-four fresh blossoms on this one plant. It could easily have been stretched to four hundred by putting in a few of those but recently withered.

These asters were still beautiful a week later, and they seemed to threaten the destruction of a favorite theory, which is that the five-flowered gentian and the humble little dandelion are positively the last flowers of the year. But by the sixteenth the last blossom had withered. So had the flowers of the red clover, white sweet clover, yarrow, some of the golden-rods and asters, and the common mallow sent its prostrate branches creeping among the thick grass and the new leaves and velvety pink blossoms kept unfolding well towards the middle of the month. The yarrow's clusters of white flowers were common in the meadows among the second crop of red clover. The fringed gentians were blossoming during the first week. Half a dozen were blossoming on the fourth; by the sixth they had dwindled to

three; by the eighth two more had withered and the blue had all faded from the last blossom by the twelfth. It is doubtless the fringed gentian to which Bryant refers in his sonnet on November when he writes:

*“And the blue gentian flower, that, in the breeze,
Nods lonely, of our beauteous race the last.”*

But meanwhile the little five-flowered gentian, otherwise known as the stiff gentian, or by the less euphonious name of ague weed, was blossoming beautifully on a limestone and clay bank by the creek. After the lingering blue blossoms of the fringed gentians had withered in the marsh, when the last yellow threads of the dusty goldenrod had vanished from the roadsides and the white heads of the heath asters had faded into brown and gray, these little clusters of blue flames illuminated the sloping bank by the chipmunks' holes with a cheery brightness, for day after day, and week after week, as the month slipped by. On the sixteenth one could easily have picked a showy bouquet. By the twentieth, when all their leaves had been blackened by the nightly frosts there might still be found dozens of

little blue blossoms, sometimes as many as four on a single plant. After the leaves and stems were all blackened the little flowers kept pushing out bravely and on the twenty-fourth fifteen fresh blossoms were found in the little garden, but not more than two on a single plant. Yesterday, the twenty-seventh, only two fresh blossoms could be found, but these will certainly last until the end of the month. And thus *Gentiana quinqueflora*, var. *occidentalis*, may fairly claim the honor of being one of the last flowers of the year in this part of Iowa.

In the first ten days of the month there were crickets, grasshoppers, and brown, lemon-yellow, golden-yellow, and white butterflies wavering over the roadway, while garter snakes occasionally glided down the sunny banks. The cheering tints of early morning, the violet haze which veiled the days, above the grays and sepias of the woods, the dying roses in the sky as each day was added to the irrevocable past, the brilliance of Sirius and the glories of Aldebaran and Betelgeuse, all these were so abundantly bestowed in November that perhaps some failed to notice them at all.

And yet they were very great riches. They do not change when fortune frowns nor pass with the fleeting years. They belong to the eternal and the infinite. In their great peace how insignificant seem the few short years of earthly power for which men tread the weary way until the best of their lives is gone. "I long ago discovered that it was not for me to make any great mark in the world and so I set about to make a mark on myself," wrote a good old nature-lover recently. He had quit his muck-raking fairly early in life and taken the crown of joy and peace from the Shining One. The azure sky, the foam-flecked wave, the music of the rain, and the song of the wind; the brightening beams of morn and the ashes of roses in the sunset sky; the happy melodies of the birds and the splendid silences of the stars — these were his riches; and in their stay and comfort he traveled, softly singing down life's road until he reached the golden gate which opened gently for him as he passed into his rest.

SUNNY DAYS IN DECEMBER

XII. SUNNY DAYS IN DECEMBER

*“Oh, sweet it was and fair it was
In the brown woods today,
With only the tree-tops bending near
And all the world away.”*

WHAT, in December! Yes, why not in December? Iowa winters, as a rule, do not begin until the day prescribed by the calendar, the twenty-first of December. To be sure there is usually a snow storm or two before that date. But more often than not all the snow disappears, leaving the fields bare and the woods inviting until well along towards Christmas, keeping up a sweet illusion of the fall. For the most part, too, the weather is kind. Such adjectives as mild, moist, bright, bracing, even balmy, describe many of the December days in the nature-lover's note book, especially if he be of an optimistic turn of mind. The records of the Mississippi river, recently published, show that in the past thirty-six winters there have been

twenty-four when the big river was not closed to traffic until after the twentieth of December. And even after that date there are some sunny days when the sunny side of a wooded slope by the river bank seems almost as warm as in May. These are days like the "Christmas of 1888" which Whittier immortalized in his beautiful lines:

*"Lo! Swift as thought the heavenly radiance came.
God gave a perfect day."*

But such days are more common in Iowa than in New England. The sixteenth, for example, was a day to which the adjective balmy could well be applied. It is true that the next day was clear and cold, but the eighteenth was another of such days as tempt the feet toward the forest. While the morning is still gray Venus hangs like a beautiful jewel in the eastern sky. She pales in the growing splendor of Aurora's coming chariot and soon the ruddy sun smiles among the tree-trunks in the distant woodland. By the time he has climbed to the topmost twigs the wood is in a golden glow. It seems to be true, in December, as in May that

*"Its arms outstretched, the Druid wood
Waits with its benedicite"*

and as the day begins to fulfill the promise of the early morning one is almost tempted to believe that he can find the purple blue flower of an hepatica on its hairy scape among the protecting fallen leaves. At least this will serve as an excuse. It is always easy to find an excuse.

But he who goes to the Iowa woods in December must not expect to find flowers. Even the late stayers like the dandelion finally give up the ghost and the harbingers of spring are not to be wooed away from wisdom by warm winter suns. But if there are no flowers, at least there is a good deal of interesting greenery for him who has eyes to see. The hepaticas do their best to make up for any possible disappointment by exhibiting an abundance of their "liver-leaved" greenness. The wild strawberry here and there shows its tender green leaves and delicate pink stalks, while two other members of the rose family, the five-finger and the creeping blackberry, also give their unseared leaves towards the display. Beneath the thick carpet of fallen leaves are many green

leaves. A little farther on, where the dell is thickly carpeted with the fallen fronds of the maiden-hair fern, still delicately beautiful though no longer green, the evergreen wood fern shows green and bright, together with the prize which alone would save the day from disappointment, a few fronds of the Christmas fern. Close by is a little forest of the equisetum or scouring rush, green and thriving as if this were a damp morning in May. This list of good green things is respectfully presented for the consideration of those who say that Iowa woods in December are bleak and bare. For good measure we will throw in a good-sized patch of grass in a sheltered nook, almost as green as in early September.

Then there is the green-brier, otherwise known as cat-brier, which has not received half the attention it deserves, though some discerning ones have it on their porches. One pretentious eastern volume devoted to the plants of the United States, ignores or omits it entirely. Another gives it but a few lines, and a third dismisses it by giving the name carrion flower to the whole genus and objecting to the odor of its flowers. But the most attractive species in the



"USUALLY A SNOWSTORM OR TWO"

December woods is not the carrion-flower (*smilax herbacea*), but the *smilax hispida*. The upper part of the stem is a vivid green, and it climbs high upon a velvet, or staghorn, sumac to display its wealth of mucilaginous blackberries, sometimes almost a peck upon a single vine. They make a pretty contrast to the torch-like clusters of red berries borne by the sumac which remain all winter. But the lower part of the green brier's stem is even more interesting. It is densely crowded with bristles, or perhaps it would be more precise to say prickles and bristles since they are of two sizes. Muhlenberg, who first described them, called them blackish bristly prickles; but the word blackish scarcely does them justice, for their peculiar beauty lies in the decided violet tinge which they give to the stem of the plant.

In pleasing contrast to the green stem of the smilax are the cherry-red stem of the wild red raspberry and the wine-red of the black raspberry which is usually found close by. Both of them are comely maidens and why Mother Nature has seen fit to subdue their healthy red by the use of delicate white face powder is something of a mystery. But the "bloom" is there, sparingly

on the red raspberry and dense upon the black raspberry. Not all the wild winds of winter can blow it off; but even a gentlemanly touch removes it and brings the blush beneath and in this respect it seems very human.

One of the curiosities of the December woods in Iowa is the American bladdernut (*Staphylea trifolia*), with its cinnamon-brown triangular seed-pods so inflated that they look like toy balloons. The seeds inside of the three-lobed membranaceous pod have broken loose from their fastenings and they rattle like dice in a box when the pod is shaken; there are from two to five, often four, in a pod, they are about as large as peas but flattened ovoid in shape and look as if they might have been carved out of ivory. This shrub grows from eight to fifteen feet high and has a light greenish-gray bark with linear white cracks; the recent branches are pale green, with white lenticels and downy; as they grow older they become brownish purple and finally gray. The shrub has beautiful drooping racemes of white flowers in May and is said to improve under cultivation. It deserves to be promoted to lawns and gardens. Some plants seem to have their own ideas about

promotion and prefer to stay as far from civilization as possible. When they are taken captive they pine and die, like the best of the forest birds; but the bladdernut is more sociable.

We usually think of the woods as cold and silent in December, but on a sunny morning they are fairly merry with bird music. Some of it, to be sure, is of a "ten, twent', thirt'" variety as compared with the grand opera singers of the summer woods; but some of it is fine. As you begin to approach the woods you are likely to hear the reveille of three noisy fellows, the caw of the crow, the scream of the blue jay, and the "quank-quank" of the nuthatch. A little nearer and the sharp pleek and screaming rattle of the woodpecker floats out of the tree-tops. Then the merry but unobtrusive notes of the chickadee come laughing from a high limb. On cold and windy days he usually stays in the brush close to the ground, but on bright mornings he sings from the tree-tops. His good humor is unfailing, whatever the weather. He whistles "pee-ho" or sings "chick-a-dee-dee-dee" every day during the winter. Those who dwell within the smell of coal

smoke and have never heard the music of this graceful little creature, have missed one of the joys of life. He is very sociable and will come within a few feet to give a discreet watcher an opportunity to admire his black cap, nape and throat, his blue-gray coat, his brownish-white vest, and his white cheeks.

By the side of a sunny little brook which empties into the river near by there is a veritable flock of birds. Numerous juncos are fluttering about, displaying their slate-gray necks, heads, and throats, and the white in their tail feathers. There are continuous faint chirps but these are scarcely noticed because a pair of tree sparrows are on low twigs close by making real music. The city dweller who sees only the sooty English sparrows, ought to go to the woods and get acquainted with the real sparrows. A hairy woodpecker hops about the ground near the foot of the trunk of a big elm. She shows off to advantage her black wings striped with white with the broad white stripe down her back. If her mate was with her he would have a red band on the back of his head. The hairy woodpecker, the downy woodpecker, and the white-breasted nuthatch are very much

alike, and yet there are decisive points of difference. The hairy woodpecker is about as big as a robin and his outer tail feathers are white, not barred. The downy woodpecker is about the size of a sparrow and his outer tail-feathers are white, barred with black. The hairy woodpecker makes a little more noise than the other, and his tap, tap, tap on the branches of the trees is a little more resonant. The white-breasted nuthatch is the same size as the downy woodpecker, but his coat is ashy-blue, his cap and nape black, his cheeks white, and his breast a yellowish-white. But the greatest point of difference between him and the woodpeckers is his habit of running down the branches of the trees as well as up. When the woodpecker gets to the top of a branch he has to go down backwards or fly down and start up again. When the nuthatch gets to the top he turns around and runs down. All these birds are common in Iowa woods in winter. But comparatively few Iowans know it.

The river has a narrow fringe of ice on either side but the current flows swiftly in the center and bears much floating young ice which was broken up almost as soon as formed. But the ponds a few rods from the river's edge are frozen

firm enough to walk upon. The ice is clear as crystal and the water beneath is but a foot or two deep. As one walks over the ice, scores of fine carp scoot ahead in an effort to get out of sight — a difficult task because of the transparency of the ice and the limited area of the pond. Shoals of minnows are also to be seen beneath the ice; apparently the carp are in no danger of death by starvation during the winter. But the pond is shallow and there is danger of their being smothered by reason of fierce frosts and heavy storms. The Iowa winter, by and by, will be

*“A winter such as when birds die
Even the mud and slime of the warm lakes
In the deep forests; and the fishes lie
Stiffened in the translucent ice, which makes
A wrinkled clod as hard as brick.”*

An epicure might be tempted to say that the carp deserves no better fate. But some of the young men in the vicinity are preparing to save the fish by cutting holes in the ice through which they expect to take the carp later. As a beginning they have lifted out half a dozen sand turtles and one snapper. And this moves the owner of the pond, who is present, to say: “I have lived here for sixty years and tried to catch a sand



"THE RED BIRCH IS BEAUTIFUL IN THE LOWLANDS"

turtle in the act of laying her eggs. But I have only seen it twice in the sixty years. They crawl up the bank into the sand and lay their eggs all at one time, not one at a time, like a hen. On one occasion the turtle had appropriated an old squirrel hole for her nest."

This pond might indeed be called part of a druid wood. On one side of it is the steep limestone slope which limits the river's flood-plain. Hard maple, hickories, choke-cherry, shad-bush, hornbeam, chestnut, oak, and other trees and shrubs which flourish on rocky hillsides make a beautiful background even in winter for that side of the pond. On the lowlands which surround the other three sides are noble specimens of oak, elm, cottonwood, soft maple, red birch, basswood, and ash.

Shakespeare makes Juliet say

*"What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet."*

But the lady was pleading for a lover and it is to be feared there were loop-holes in her logic. Certainly the name basswood does not suggest any poesy or beauty; we think only of wood-fibre plaster, wooden-ware, cheap furniture, or wood-carv-

ings. But mention lime or linden, which are other names for the same tree, and we think of all the poets and nature-lovers, Homer, Horace, Virgil, and Pliny, to Tennyson, Lowell, Longfellow, and Riley, who have sung about the lime and the linden. The very name brings the fragrance of the nectar-laden blossoms and the murmuring of the honey-bees. Ovid's story of Baucis and Philemon was once familiar to every schoolboy. When the time came for that good couple to die Baucis was changed to a linden while Philemon was changed to an oak. Linneus was named from a linden tree which stood near his father's home. Herodotus mentions the linden tree, but its earliest story is written in the tertiary rocks of the far-away arctic circle. It belongs to one of the "fine old families" and it has never yet disgraced the family name. *Tilia Americana*, as the scientists call it, is known in winter by its fat, dark red buds. In the winter they shine like rubies and in the spring they break into a vivid green. As Tennyson says:

"A million emeralds break from the ruby-budded lime."

Another tree which grows around this pond to great size and beauty is the white ash, the most

beautiful of all the American species. Some of them are eighty-five to ninety feet in height. In the fall the leaves were bronze, then chocolate, next a violet-brown, and finally a beautiful yellow. Now they have fallen but the tree is still adorned with many of the paniced samaras, or winged seeds. But the most beauty lies in the topmost twigs which have a cross-shaped branching against the sky. No more beautiful sight can be seen in the winter woods than the last rays of the departing sun touching these topmost twigs with beauty.

There are moments in every life when the soul seems to see through "this muddy vesture of decay which doth grossly close it in" and behold a transfiguration of nature or hear a heavenly harmony. It is so in all forms of beauty. We may sit with pulses unquickened, many times, maybe, while some gifted pianist plays Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata; but some day we hear it played once again and we forget time, place, and performer and enter into the mood of the master as he played it for the blind girl in her cottage while the silver light streamed through the window panes of her humble dwelling and the music

seemed to be floating down, like the moonlight, straight from heaven's gate. We may pass the slender spire of some sanctuary hundreds of times and if we take note at all of the cross at the top it is merely to wonder why men's lives were put in peril to place it up so high; but when the rosy fingers of some winter sunrise touch the golden cross with ruby tints it seems indeed as if "all the light of sacred glory gathers round its head sublime." We are conscious that it was put so high to lift the eyes and the mind above the day and the dust and the devious ways to where peace and beauty and truth ever dwell. And so with this graceful tree rising straight up nearly a hundred feet from the river's brink. Hitherto we may have done no more than to study curiously its trunk and branches and twigs, its bark and buds and leaves, its flowers and fruit. But now, as the sands of the old year have almost run out, there falls on this old gray tree "an influence luminous and serene, a shining peace." The trunk is in darkness and the cold river, bearing broken ice, flows by in the gathering gloom. But from the west, over the top of the bluff, there come the last rays of the sinking sun and light



SUNSET ON CHRISTMAS EVE

up all the topmost twigs. It is as if some unseen acolyte had lighted the candles on the altar in front of myriads of little crosses. It seems fitting that this tree whose twigs are silhouetted against the sky in the shape of the cross, should be associated with the tradition, mentioned as far back as Pliny, that no serpent is ever found beneath its shade. The lights fade in front of the little crosses, but the feeling of exaltation and ecstasy remains. We can appreciate something of the feeling which must have possessed Sir Galahad when he saw the Holy Grail, Moses when he saw the burning bush, Elijah when he heard the still, small voice, Peter, James, and John when they saw the Transfiguration. These are the moments when we really live. Do they grow more or less frequent as we grow older? What was it Wordsworth said:

*“There was a time when meadow, grove and stream,
The earth, and every common sight
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore —
Turn wheresoe’er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.”*

And let none think that this love of beauty is eccentric or effeminate. "For this love of beauty," says Ruskin, "is an essential part of all human nature and though it can long co-exist with states of life in many other respects unvirtuous, it is in itself wholly good; the direct adversary of envy, avarice, mean worldly care and cruelty. The men in whom it has been strong have always been compassionate, and lovers of justice, and the earliest declarers and discoverers of things conducive to the happiness of mankind."

In one part of the great estate which I call mine there is a valley a mile long which begins abruptly in a swampy open field and wanders down, scarcely fifty feet wide, between high and thickly timbered slopes, until it is merged in the broader valley of the creek. Some millions of years, probably, before Eve ate the apple, the glaciers plowed out this deep valley. They have left behind as a souvenir a mammoth granite rock, large enough to make the foundations of a six-story block.

Past the base of this rock flows a little brook, about as large as that from which Sir Launfal gave the beggar a drink. Fed by living springs, it is never wholly dry; even in the drought of summer the grackles wade in it to find their food. In the early autumn it is a favorite bathing place

of the goldfinches and the juncos. In the winter it is beautiful with the "fairy architecture of the frost," but in December, when the first snows robe the little valley with ermine, the dark water of the brook makes a band of black, with spangles of gold here and there as the sunlight is reflected from its surface.

Never shall I forget one Christmas eve in this little valley. It had been an afternoon of warm, golden sunshine, the soft light bringing out all the latent beauty in the fluttering, whispering leaves of the white oaks. A reminiscence of the purples and the wine-reds of October was still in the heart of the leaves beneath the surfaces of sepia. And while that rosy glow from the heart of the leaf shines through the brown and wrinkled skin it is still autumn and not winter no matter what the calendars may say.

The golden-crowned kinglets had been flitting among the undergrowth during the afternoon and towards sunset came the purple finches, seeking a night's lodging beneath the protecting tufts of white oak leaves, so as to be safe from the predatory birds of the night. After the manner of their kind they gathered by twos and threes with many a signalling chirp. Ever and anon

one of them would fly straight up in the air to see that all was safe. By-and-by they were silent and their rustlings among the leaves were heard no more. The light wind, which had been sighing among the branches during the afternoon, was stilled, as if in preparation for "the peaceful night, wherein the Prince of light His reign of peace upon the earth began."

Above the snowy crest of the hill the sun smiled a bright goodbye. Just at a turn in its course, the little stream, between its snowy banks, mirrored the sun and flashed like the wonderful shield of "Noonday Sun" in "Gareth and Lynette." Panels of sunlight, framed in shadows, streamed across the snow. The air was filled with a great peace and a "sense of something far more deeply interfused." For long the sunlight lingered; it seemed loth to leave so fair and wholesome a world. It must have been on such a "hallowed and gracious" night that Shakespeare wrote his Christmas eve description in Hamlet.

Full of tender memories, full of faith and beauty is the end of a day, the end of the autumn, the end of the year. We have so loved it we are loth to let it go. But tomorrow will be better. Tomorrow is Christmas morning.

